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Viewpoint

The land of the past? Neo-populism, neo-fascism, and the failure of the left in Brazil

In 1941, Stefan Zweig published the book *Brazil, Land of the Future* (Zweig, 1941), an essay full of wonder and optimism about the country where he had chosen to go into exile. Zweig, an Austrian Jew who had fled from a war-ravaged Europe, described Brazil as a country not bound by the traditions and prejudices that afflicted Europe, which at that time was in the thrall of fascism. Zweig naively underestimated the fact that Brazil was a country plagued by social inequalities and regional disparities and haunted by the ghosts of slavery. Eighty years after the publication of Zweig's book, with the country still riven by social and regional inequalities, we are bearing witness to the government of Jair Bolsonaro, a former Army captain and federal deputy elected President of the Republic in 2018. Under Bolsonaro, rights have been cut, the press threatened, minorities disrespected, police brutality encouraged, and state secularism challenged by evangelical Protestantism (of which many of Bolsonaro's supporters and allies are adherents). Present-day Brazil, the eighth largest economy in the world, seems to be reliving a chapter from its past – specifically, the period between 1964 and 1985, when the country was controlled by one of the longest-running military dictatorships in Latin American history.

Some of the political and institutional setbacks to democratic 'normality' that have occurred since January 2019 have been well publicized internationally. One prominent example concerns environmental policy. Routinely accusing international environmental forums, NGOs and scientific institutions of 'playing the game of international communism', Bolsonaro and his officials have denied global warming, dismissed the Paris Agreement on climate change and threatened civil servants working for the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the Chico Mendes Institute of Biodiversity (ICMBio). As well, they have blocked the operations of the international Amazon Fund, facilitated the opening of indigenous lands to mining and agribusiness, and directly and indirectly encouraged loggers, devastating the Amazon. Other setbacks have been less widely reported by the international press, but are no less important: the belittling of human rights activists; the growing tolerance of racism, LGBT-phobia and gender oppression; and outright prejudice against indigenous peoples and inhabitants of the Northeast (the country's poorest region, which voted against Bolsonaro by a wide margin in 2018). Alongside this, Brazil's universities, described as 'leftist dens', have been pressured by diminishing financial support and by attempts to restrict university autonomy; at the same time, the government has sought to implement a National Civic-Military Schools Programme, which will create two hundred schools for basic education by 2023, with retired military agents serving as tutors. Last but not least, Bolsonaro's underestimation of the coronavirus epidemic exemplifies his administration's anti-science obscurantism and extreme-right arrogance.

Are we experiencing an emerging (neo-)fascism in Brazil? Argentine political scientist Atílio Borón, for one, argues that while the Bolsonaro government is on the far right, it is not properly fascist, since fascism was a unique historical phenomenon relating to European conditions in the 1930s and 1940s (Borón, 2019). Indeed, the Bolsonaro government has quite peculiar characteristics compared with European fascism: for example, while the latter presupposed a strong state apparatus to direct the economy, the Brazilian government, in spite of its bellicose rhetoric and authoritarian measures, follows a strongly neoliberal economic policy. However, Bernardo (2003) offers a powerful, heterodox interpretation of fascism, emphasising that fascist phenomena appear in many guises and adapt to different circumstances. In the present Brazilian case, a neo-fascist core seems to have converged with the interests and rhetoric of fundamentalist-Pentecostalist religious leaders, and both of these groups have allied themselves with members of the military and with neoliberal think-tanks (albeit not without friction). In other words, there is a power bloc made up of non-fascist conservatives and neo-fascist ultra-rightists – though, for the time being, Brazil's neo-fascist forces still lack the support of a broad, fanatical mass movement, which was a key feature of European fascism.

Debates about the rise of far right in Brazil usually highlight the complex global/international and national context in which Brazilian politics have taken shape in recent years: the re-emergence of nationalisms and right-wing populism globally since the end of the 20th century; the end of the commodity boom of the first decade of the 21st century; and the start of an economic crisis in Brazil around 2014, which led businesspeople to support governments identified with neoliberal policies and antagonism to labour rights. However, narratives among progressives in Brazil and abroad about the causes of Brazil's current political conjuncture do not pay due attention to the responsibilities of the leftist, neo-populist Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores/PT) itself in paving the way for Bolsonaro's election. By this I do not refer specifically or even basically to the theme of corruption, though a series of corruption scandals involving the Workers' Party, which controlled the Brazilian state from 2003 to 2016, certainly inflamed the more conservative segments of the middle classes. I refer above all to something far more relevant and profound from an emancipatory point of view: the co-optation of social movement organisations, trade unions and broad sectors of civil society by the PT's neo-populism, which in the long run weakened the popular resistance capacity of the Brazilian social fabric.

While we must recognise the authoritarian characteristics of the Bolsonaro regime, we also need to deal honestly with the shortcomings of the PT governments. In fact, the Workers' Party in general, and its uncontested and charismatic leader Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, have always been viewed by the international left with excessive optimism. Prominent representatives of the 'state-centred' left intelligentsia often cultivated unrealistic expectations that could only be justified through an outdated view of 'socialism' that ignored the serious contradictions in

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the political dynamics and policy actions of leftist parties. Perry Anderson, for example, in a balance-sheet of the Lula government published in 2011, stated glowingly that "[b]y any criterion, Luís Inácio da Silva is the most successful politician of his time" (Anderson, 2011, np). David Harvey likewise remarked that 'left political parties and labor unions are significant still, and their takeover of aspects of state power, as with the Workers' Party in Brazil or the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela, has had a clear impact on left thinking, not only in Latin America' (Harvey, 2009, np).

At this juncture, therefore, we must say a few words about the period between 2003 and 2016, against which the Bolsonaro government defines itself (the short interregnum of Vice-President Michel Temer, between Dilma Rousseff's impeachment by the Congress in 2016 and the election of Bolsonaro in 2018, can be viewed as a kind of traditional, right-centrist transition period). Despite some undeniable advances and social gains in sectors ranging from public health and education to infrastructure investments, the left-wing populism of the Workers' Party governments under Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff represented a phenomenon fraught with contradictions. For example, while subsidies such as the *Bolsa Família* Programme flowed to disadvantaged populations, with positive effects on food security and living conditions in general, this form of clientelism did nothing to raise political awareness among workers, or to organise them politically. While the interests of marginalised populations were better addressed and the dignity of minority groups much more respected under such a government, there were many situations in which the state imposed sacrifices on vulnerable populations as an apparently inevitable price to be paid in the name of 'economic development'. Environmental protection, for instance, was sometimes treated as a luxury, and the interests and rights of people affected by environmental contamination, dam construction and agribusiness pressure were viewed as matters of minor importance.

From the outset, the Lula da Silva government (2003–2010) seemed to be more willing to make concessions to agribusiness, mining companies and other capitalist interests than to consistently defend the interests of subaltern groups. This was not only due to economic calculations (such as attracting foreign investments and sponsoring large infrastructure projects), but also to the need for parliamentary support from the powerful mining and agribusiness lobbies in the Brazilian Congress. As early as in 2003, the Ministry of the Environment was put under strong pressure from within the government itself to make several concessions. This was the case, for instance, regarding demands for more tolerance for transgenic soya and maize. As a result, the Ministry made these concessions, to the point of agreeing to an amnesty that benefitted large-scale farmers who had previously been involved in the illegal cultivation of genetically modified crops. The pressure from large-scale landowners culminated in the approval of the new Biosafety Law in 2005, which is overseen by the National Technical Biosafety Commission. This regulatory body is composed of professionals from different ministries and biotechnology industries, whose function is to facilitate, not to hinder, the dissemination of genetically engineered products (Lisboa, 2011, pp. 18–20).

Another example was the construction in the Amazon of two large hydroelectric dams on the Madeira River (Santo Antonio and Jirau) and another one on the Xingu River (Belo Monte). Environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and a significant segment of Brazilian public opinion mobilised against these dams through the press and online campaigns, but without success. At the same time and in the same region, the expansion of cattle herds continued under the PT government, with serious consequences in terms of deforestation. In addition, the expansion of soybean cultivation in the Brazilian *cerrado* (savannah), at the margins of the Amazon region, put the rainforest and the communities that inhabit it under increasing pressure.

Much of the pressure from within the government to weaken and 'flexibilise' environmental mandates (for instance, by speeding-up environmental licensing) was led by none other than Dilma Rousseff, who was Minister of Mines and Energy between 2003 and 2005 and head of the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Presidency between 2005 and 2010, when she succeeded Lula as President of Brazil. Not surprisingly, Rousseff's government endorsed the new Forestry Code of 2012, which has been extremely generous to large-scale farmers, most notably by granting amnesty to those involved in illegal logging, and by reducing the size of environmentally protected areas.

There are two lessons to be drawn from the Brazilian experience of the past two decades. The first is that, no matter how hard they try to be accepted into the conventional political arena, leftist governments will never be welcomed by the ruling classes, and sooner or later they will face a serious revanchism on the part of conservative social and economic interests. The second lesson has been heard many times in the past, but it remains as contemporary as ever: workers' emancipation (and the emancipation of all oppressed groups) must be undertaken by the workers (and oppressed people) themselves. Placing excessive hopes on political leaders and parties and neglecting the crucial role of a truly autonomous civil society can be source of great frustrations, as we have seen with the African National Congress (ANC) governments after Nelson Mandela's Presidency. Even worse, it can lead to the kinds of setbacks we see with the Bolsonaro government. By co-opting unions, social movements organisations and even student associations, Workers' Party governments have not strengthened the political voice of the working class or minorities at a time when the extreme right is experiencing a worldwide resurgence, from the United States to Hungary and from Turkey to the Philippines. Quite the contrary.

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